Introduction

I see this book as a culmination of a series of endeavours that I have made over the past years. This attempt was to query the assumption of earlier advantage of the west in attaining capitalism, modernity, industrialization and even printing, leading to the kind of division between those societies with which the anthropologist traditionally dealt and those the sociologist and the historian elected to study.[1] Let me explain how I got there. The cut between traditional and modern societies was embodied in Dumont's works on India which he contrasted with the Christian west,[2] and this again was implied in Durkheim's and Lévi-Strauss's conception of China as a primitive society compared with Europe, the first in relation to religion, and especially in his essay with Mauss on *Primitive Classification*,[3] and the latter in his treatment of kinship in the *Elementary Forms*.[4] How, I asked myself, was this 'primitiveness' to be reconciled with Joseph Needham's assessment of Chinese science as being so much in advance of the west until the period of the Renaissance; or with the assertions of various sinologists that until the beginning of the nineteenth century, China's was the major world economy, the exporter of manufactured products (ceramics, silks, as well as lacquer and tea, which were transformed if not manufactured)? There had to be something wrong somewhere and to that misapprehension Watt and I certainly contributed[5] when we pointed to the positive role of the phonetic alphabet in the achievements of ancient Greece (rather than employing an account in terms of the Greek genius) and contrasted that with the supposedly difficult part played by logographic scripts in China, in ancient Egypt and in Mesopotamia. It became important therefore to show, in the *Domestication of the Savage Mind*,[6] that a 'great transformation' occurred in all literate societies as the result of the invention of writing, not simply

[1] On the relationship between capitalism, modernity and industrialization, see my *Capitalism and Modernity* (Goody 2004).
[2] Dumont 1963. [3] Durkheim and Mauss 1967 [1903].
[4] Lévi-Strauss 1949. [5] Goody and Watt 1963. [6] Goody 1977.

with the alphabet but with all scripts, in what Gordon Childe called the Urban Revolution of the Bronze Age.[7] And that this was highly significant as far as culture and social organization were concerned.

It has been objected that instead of the binary division, for example, between savage (*sauvage*) and domesticated societies, I was introducing a similar divide between oral and literate ones. But my difference was not a binary one since it took account of other changes in the means and mode of communication, the human invention of language in the first place, the role of different forms of writing (script types), of changes in the writing materials (tablets, papyrus, parchment, paper) and in the marking instruments (reeds, brush, pens); with paper there was the question of roll or book, the advent of woodblock printing, of moveable type, of the printing press, the rotary press, of the electronic media and finally of the internet. All of these altered the potentialities of 'a knowledge society'. In addition there was the use made of these. So a consideration of these factors was important in plotting the general course of world history to take into account the mode of communication as well as that of production and of destruction (coercion). Instead of looking only at the negative aspect of logographic writing, it was essential to appreciate the positive side as well. This form of non-phonetic writing meant that China could export its culture over different linguistic areas which constituted an enormous internal market not only for material goods but also for the circulation of written information. Indeed I would now argue that instead of this form of writing being an impediment to development, it may represent the way of the future of world civilization.[8]

I followed this work on the social effects of literacy with two other studies of particular aspects of cultural activity, that is, the preparation of food[9] and the cultivation of flowers,[10] in which I tried to show the other similarities between the major cultures of the east and west of the Eurasian continent, in addition to writing, and at the same time to contrast those of sub-Saharan Africa which had remained largely oral. In both of these fields, the east had at least an equally elaborate culture as the west: the high cuisine of China (with India and Islam) compared with France and Italy, and the use of flowers in India, Persia, China and Japan (whence came many varieties of our domesticated plants, especially fruit) compared with our own use of floral motifs in art and in life. Like writing, both of these complex features had something to do with the advances in agriculture and the economy generally that had been made with the use of metals (together with the plough and the wheel) in the various changes that occurred in the Bronze Age. These changes produced a complex,

[7] Childe 1942. [8] Goody forthcoming. [9] Goody 1982. [10] Goody 1993.

advanced agriculture and urban life, leading to the differentiation of economic classes and hence to that of forms of preparing the food they ate, to the types of cooking, as well as to the domestication and use of 'aesthetic' plants both for personal celebration and for ritual purposes. Neither high cuisine nor domesticated flowers were found in sub-Saharan Africa (except marginally), nor indeed was writing, since the Bronze Age never reached that continent (though later on iron-working did), despite the complex forms of culture it displayed in other ways. I have examined the differences due to the influence of writing on various aspects of social organization, on religion, on economics, on politics and on law,[11] and in another publication even on kinship, although this difference was the result of the associated economy more than communication itself.[12]

These studies led on to a more general one in which I reconsidered the differences sociologists had found between the east and west, in terms of rationality and accounting systems (especially Max Weber), in terms of modes of production (in the work of Marx and many others), finding these suggestions questionable, at least until we arrived at the Renaissance or the Industrial Revolution. So I needed to examine the widespread thesis that since the Bronze Age there had been a parting of the ways between east and west, the latter leading to Antiquity, to feudalism and to capitalism, the former to Asiatic exceptionalism, which was marked by despotism, by irrigation (rather than by rain-fed) agriculture, that led away from the flowering of the arts and sciences that the west experienced, not only in the Renaissance but also before the period that saw the rise of the bourgeoisie and of financial capitalism, all of which were deemed to be interrelated. In my study *The Theft of History*, I examined the work of various authors, trying to show that the achievements of the ancient world, remarkable in many ways, were not as unique as the theory about the origins of capitalism and modernization in the west demanded and that feudalism represented a collapse of the urban civilization of the Bronze Age, not an inevitable stage on the way to capitalism. In other words, the hypothetical divergence between east and west was much less obvious than that demanded by ethnocentric, teleological European historiography, which crystallized in the mid nineteenth century at a time when the west clearly had an important advantage in the economy and in the information society more generally. Not all of this was Marxist by any means; he and Weber were representative of a much wider set of views, common in this respect to most Europeanists. But there had been much more of a parallel development across the Eurasian continent, based upon an exchange economy. In this products and

[11] Goody 1986. [12] Goody 1976.

knowledge were transferred over the long term. No part of this vast area had a monopoly and the balance of advantage between the parts changed over time. Both had early forms of mercantile capitalism, as Braudel and others have pointed out. And if the west later developed more complex financial forms in connection with the Industrial Revolution, that was an augmentation of earlier activity and did not involve the invention of something altogether new called 'capitalism', *tout court*, but an elaboration of existing techniques and procedures.[13] Equally Elias's concept of the civilizing process and Needham's of modern science seemed to privilege a western movement towards modernization rather than considering a wider process of social development.

The historian Perry Anderson had seen the concatenation of Antiquity and feudalism at the Renaissance as being the critical factor which differentiated the west in the course of the rise of capitalism (which, as I have suggested, could be seen as having 'arisen' much more widely in Eurasia), and writers like Marx, Weber, Wallenstein and many others thought the period of the Renaissance was critical in the process. So it obviously was for Europe, a catching up by looking back to Antiquity which the Middle Ages had made necessary. But periods of such a looking back seemed to me a characteristic of literate societies more generally, wherever they were found. So too were bursts forward (golden ages) in such circumstances. Where Europe differed, and here I depended to some extent on my account of the history of representations,[14] was that to make such a burst forward, in the subjects of artistic works for example, the culture had to partially free itself from the restrictions imposed by a hegemonic, monotheistic religion, namely Christianity, and to open up to the wider world of classical, 'pagan' or polytheistic Greece and Rome. And the same recourse to a more secular way of thinking helped the new (or 'modern') science, as did the development of non-theological scholarship in institutions of higher learning, in the universities of the west. It was the desire, not to abolish nor disregard, but to modify the idea of European uniqueness either in Antiquity or in the Renaissance, that led to the present study – not to deny Europe the undoubted advantage it had in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but to see that advantage in its historical and cultural context, as a temporary phenomenon, as we see clearly from current events in China, India and elsewhere.

If I have emphasized the cultural achievements of the eastern civilizations, that is because the usual European accounts place too much stress

[13] Goody 2004.
[14] Goody 1997b. It was not simply the worship of images but their creation too. But as I have argued earlier, there was always an impulse to iconism which appeared in the Catholic Church, but was later rejected by Calvinism.

on their 'backwardness', which seems a very nineteenth-century view from the industrialized west. Today that 'backwardness' seems distinctly temporary, like that of Europe in the early Middle Ages. The negative role, at certain times, of the Abrahamistic religions seems to me crucial in accounting for the impact of the Renaissance and the Jewish Emancipation, as well as the frequently conservative approach to knowledge of Islam. But in making this point, I may have slightly highlighted the achievements of the one and downplayed those of the other. If so, it is a corrective that was to be made, given the continuing trend of much social science, not only western.

This book, then, follows on from earlier work. In addition to working in Africa, I have long been interested in trying to look at European history and sociology in a comparative way (as befits an anthropologist) and this study attempts the same kind of enterprise with regard to that very European institution of the Italian Renaissance, to which we all look back. As I have said, it argues that all literate societies have periods of looking back, when the old is re-established sometimes with a renewed burst of energy, leading to a flowering of the culture. They have also periods when the religious element is played down, leading to humanistic episodes that provide humans with greater freedom, both in science and the arts. In these areas this suspension of belief was not unimportant and looking back to the pagan classics certainly eased the path.

In chapter 1, I discuss the general problem of the Renaissance in a comparative perspective. In the second chapter, I shall examine one aspect in the Renaissance of knowledge in Europe, namely the foundation of what is often said to be the first medical school in Europe, at the University of Montpellier, in order to bring out the contributions of other cultures, Arabic and Jewish, to the rebirth of knowledge in that continent, knowledge which came from the other literate cultures. Chapter 3 returns to the theme of comparative renaissances and looks at the importance of the growth of secular knowledge and the conceptualization of the religious. That movement seems intrinsic both to the Italian and to the Song Renaissance in China as well as to various cultural efflorescences in Islam. Chapter 4 deals with the cultural history of Islam in some detail and this continues for Judaism, India and China in chapters 5, 6 and 7. Chapter 8 attempts to sum up the discussion.

In the text I have tried to avoid diacriticals and have therefore adopted Pinyin (without diacritics) for Chinese and have followed Romila Thapar in *A History of India* for the spelling of Indian words as well as F. Robinson in his *Cambridge History of Islam* for Arabic. The translations from French are my own.

I want to say a word about the illustrations. It would be unthinkable to produce a book about the western Renaissance without giving some idea of its achievements in the visual arts. Yet this represents only one part of its activity. How would one represent visually its attainments in what has been called 'modern sciences'? By a sketch of a 'black hole', or a drawing of a pipette? In a parallel fashion we can find no adequate visual representation for the Abbasid achievement in science (and in translation) when the visual field was dominated by the Abrahamistic prohibition on figurative representation. What I have shown here for Islam comes mainly from Iran and Afghanistan, or from the Mughals, all of which were much influenced by Chinese painting. Western Islam was more aniconic. It produced its own Renaissance in intellectual activity, especially around the great library at Cordoba and later the palace of the Alhambra, but painting was virtually absent. India had a strong visual tradition but this was rarely individualized. There are, however, significant examples from the productive periods. China was of course the simplest. Not only did it have a flourishing tradition of painting but works were individually acknowledged, and in some cases recognized as masterworks.

1 The idea of a renaissance

Beginning with the 'first lights' (*primi lumi*) of the fourteenth century, the Italian Renaissance has often been seen as the critical moment in the development of 'modernity', in terms not only both of the arts and of the sciences, but from the point of view of economic development also of the advent of capitalism. That this was certainly an important moment in history, even world history, there can be no doubt. But how unique was it in a general way? There is a specific historical problem as well as a general sociological one. All societies in stasis require some kind of rebirth to get them moving again, and that may involve a looking back to a previous era (Antiquity in the European case) or it may involve another type of efflorescence.

My own polemical background is this. I do not view the Italian Renaissance as the key to modernity and to capitalism. This seems to me a claim that has been made by teleologically inclined Europeans. In my opinion its origins were to be found more widely, not only in Arabic knowledge but in influential borrowings from India and China. What we speak of as capitalism had its roots in a wider Eurasian literate culture that had developed rapidly since the Bronze Age, exchanging goods, exchanging information. The fact of literacy was important because it permitted the growth of knowledge as well as of the economies that would exchange their products. As distinct from purely oral communication, literacy made language visible; it made language into a material object, which could pass between cultures and which existed over time in the same form. Consequently, all written cultures could at times look back and revive past knowledge, as was the case with the humanists in Europe, and possibly lead onto cultural efflorescence, that is, to a definite burst forward. Especially in religious matters, this looking back may be conservative in character rather than liberating, in the areas of the arts or the sciences. Or it is of course possible that a cultural liberation of this kind may not involve a looking back. But in a significant number of cases the two are linked together and it is into these parallel events in other literate cultures that I want to enquire, not to deny some

uniqueness of western achievements but to contextualize and explain them.

What were the main features of the Italian Renaissance from a comparative point of view?[1] Firstly, there was the revival of classical knowledge, as in the work of the humanists, which had long been set aside by a hegemonic religion. The notion of a renaissance has a somewhat similar feel to that of a *revenant* about it, as Toynbee claimed, something that comes back from the dead. That is what happened in the Italian Renaissance which was a rebirth, not only a coming back from the dead (of the Dark Ages) but also a revival of a 'dead' literature, the classics, which were 'brought back to life'.

In his multivolumed *A Study of History*, Toynbee looked upon a renaissance as 'one particular instance of a recurrent phenomenon'.[2] The essential feature of this genus was '[t]he evocation of a dead culture by the living representative of a civilization that is still a going concern'.[3] Here we are not only concerned with the looking back but also with a burst forward, a flowering. Toynbee does indeed argue that there were such renaissances in other parts of the world, especially in China. However, the idea of a burst forward remains implicit and he does not link the event to literacy nor yet to the secularization of knowledge.[4] In this extraordinary work, however, he does offer a more comparative approach to the Renaissance but one which is also more fragmented in that he treats separately 'renaissances of political ideas, ideals and institutions', 'renaissances of systems of law', 'renaissances of philosophies', 'renaissances of language and literature' and 'renaissances of the visual arts'. My own study accepts the breadth of Toynbee's approach but tries to deal with the problem more holistically.

Toynbee sees the Renaissance both in Christianity and in the Song period as being respectively Christian and Buddhist under a Hellenistic or Confucian 'mask'.[5] It is true that certain aspects of these traditions were incorporated but others, especially the hegemonic claims to truth, were necessarily rejected. This is not to say they reinstated earlier doctrines; they invented an approach which represented neither the one nor the other but a new flowering. Toynbee, with his persistent metaphor of the

[1] While the name for the period, Renaissance, was not an early one, right from the time of Petrarch it was realized a break had been made with what was known as the Middle Ages.
[2] Toynbee 1954: 4. [3] Toynbee 1954: 4.
[4] My use of the metaphor of the *revenant*, which runs tirelessly throughout Toynbee's work, was quite independent. The extremity of his ghostly metaphor is to be found on pp. 128–9 of vol. 9, where it gets quite out of hand.
[5] Toynbee 1954: 166.

revenant, does not fully appreciate the theoretical importance of a new birth, an efflorescence, which is intrinsic to the idea of a renaissance. Toynbee's problem, like Spengler's or Collingwood's,[6] is concerned with the 'spirit', with ideas, not with the other aspects of the period, for example its commercial activity. He also conceives his spirit in terms of the 'native genius', whatever that may mean. Rather he advocates Bury's attitude which talks of discarding 'medieval naïveté and superstition, in assuming a freer attitude towards theological authority' and of calling up 'the spirit of the Ancient World to exorcise the ghosts of the Dark Ages':[7] gradually the ancient world was excluded in favour of 'modernism' over the course of the Enlightenment.[8]

Secondly, there was also a partial secularization, a restriction of the intellectual scope of religion, which was entailed by this looking back to a pre-Christian past. Not so much, it should be said, an abandonment of the religious life but a reconsideration of the long-term appropriateness of Abrahamistic religion to control science and the arts.[9] There was the revolution in both areas, which the Florentine enterprise and the Scientific Revolution involved.[10] This revolution meant putting on one side those earlier religious restrictions in the arts and on 'scientific' knowledge about the world, implying a measure of demystification of knowledge and of life generally. Thirdly, there was the economic and social transformation of Europe beginning in Italy which was central to the achievements of the Renaissance,[11] and which, according both to Marx and Weber, led to 'modern' society.

In Europe the actors did think this change significant, even if they did not speak of it as the Renaissance. The humanists saw themselves as establishing a golden age by going back to Antiquity. Clearly not all had changed. The Gothic continued, despite the later advent of the new style, based on Roman architecture. In politics the struggle between the princes, the church and the populace went on. The economy grew. The arts and sciences were renewed. In Fontenelle's words, '[a] reading of the Ancients cleared the ignorance and the barbarity of preceding centuries . . . It suddenly gave us ideas of Truth and Beauty which we would have taken a long time to reach'.[12]

[6] Toynbee 1954: 56. [7] Bury 1924: 48; Toynbee 1954: 67.
[8] See Toynbee's discussion (1954: 68–9) of the ancients and the modern in Fontenelle 1716 [1688], Wotton 1694, Swift 1704 and Bayle 1697, a predecessor of Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (Diderot 1772).
[9] For the continuity and even expansion of other areas of religious activity see Crouzet-Pavan 2007 for Italy and see Rublack 2005 for the Reformation.
[10] The first was the subject of art historians like Berenson (1952), the second of historians of science like Needham (1954–).
[11] Jardine 1996. [12] Fontenelle 1716 [1688]: 147.

We are unlikely to find all these features occurring together anywhere else, but each feature may have its parallels in other parts of the world. Historians have spoken of other renascences in Europe, the Carolingian in the late eighth and ninth centuries, and another in the twelfth century making way for the scholastics. Some have even found a 'Renaissance' in the work of Bede of Jarrow (673–735 CE) and Alcuin of York (735–804 CE) but this was part of the Carolingian Renaissance; the Englishman Alcuin was a friend of Charlemagne. Even before that, Bolgar writes of the revival of classical studies in the early Irish monasteries (from 458 CE). But this was essentially a revival of the teaching of Latin to speakers of Celtic and Germanic languages which led them to the classics, the content of which was dangerous. As St Gregory said to Bishop Desiderius, 'the same lips cannot sing the praises of Jove and the praises of Christ'. You should not 'spend your time on the follies of secular literature'.[13] The work of pagan authors was condemned by Alcuin, Hraban and St Gallen.[14] Nevertheless, some classical learning inevitably came back into Christian culture. Others have even extended the concept abroad, where periods of efflorescence (not necessarily involving a rebirth but a flowering) have sometimes been characterized as a golden age. We want to examine these other times in other literate cultures in Eurasia where the specific term has been used but also to look at periods of dramatic change that seem to offer some parallels, and then to pursue the question of common features.

The early Italian humanists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, like Petrarch who was trained at Bologna, were constantly looking back to a 'golden age' of letters in ancient times; 'les temps revient', involving the work of searching for ancient manuscripts. These would tell them not only the proper way to write in Latin, or to represent, but also the right way to live, not by rejecting the world but by being part of it, the active life (of the town) rather than the contemplative life (of the monastery). This move did not mean that churchmen were not involved in 'humanism'; they were in some numbers. But the efflorescence went further than simply looking back to Antiquity; it has been claimed that Petrarch developed the concept of the individual and this represented the birth of 'modern man'.[15] Venice was to be *la nuova Constantinopoli*, mainly due to its close connection with the Near East, which one historian describes as 'this ancient part of an eastern empire existing in the west' (by Byzantium).[16] Meanwhile, Florence was the second Rome.

[13] Bolgar 1954: 96. [14] Bolgar 1954: 127. [15] Crouzet-Pavan 2007: 57.
[16] Crouzet-Pavan 2007: 86.